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THE BELGIAN POLITICAL SITUATION

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The little corner of Europe, now known as the independent kingdom of Belgium, has played a rôle in history entirely out of proportion to its size and political importance. Belgium has been the cause of many wars, national and international, and on her soil the fate of Europe has often been decided. It well deserves Bonaparte's appellation "the battlefield of Europe." Because of her geographic situation, right in the midst of a group of hostile powers and because of her great economic importance, this tiny land has been the choice morsel which many nations strove to possess. Burgundy, Spain, France, Austria and Holland, each in turn, ruled the country. The prize was so great that, rather than see it in the hands of any one power, the nations of Europe agreed that none of them should possess it. In this way was born the kingdom of Belgium during the early part of the nineteenth century; a German prince, Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, was made king of the newly-born nation, and its existence was safeguarded by a guarantee of neutrality.

The successive occupation by foreign powers has left comparatively little impression upon the country. The conquerors merely sent governors and armies to collect tribute and bothered little about anything else; the various communes continued to enjoy almost complete self-government, irrespective of which flag floated over them. So strongly did the communal spirit develop among the Belgians that it is today far stronger than the national spirit; the question has often been asked, "Is there such a thing as a Belgian nationality, *une âme Belge?*" Not only is the Belgian state of recent origin (1830), but the people themselves form an antagonistic hybrid. They are divided into two mutually hostile races, whose manner of life, language, politics, religion, and ideals present sharp differences. In the north are the provinces of Flanders, Brabant, Anvers and Limburg, peopled by about four million Flemings of Teutonic stock, speaking a Dutch dialect called Flemish and living mainly by agriculture. There are no Dutch

so Dutch as these Flemings: stout of body, of fair complexion, conservative in ideals and phlegmatic in temperament. In the south are the provinces of Hainaut, Luxembourg, Liège and Namur, inhabited by about three million Walloons, of Celtic origin, speaking French and living almost entirely by industry. In temperament and ideals, these Walloons strongly resemble the French whom they greatly admire and constantly imitate. The religion of the Dutch Flemings is Catholic in the full sense of the word; among them the church rules completely and unquestionably in every department of life. It was for religion's sake that they twice broke away from their Protestant kinsmen in Holland. Let an issue arise concerning the church and the Fleming immediately makes a rush for the altar, remarked the Brussels radical journal, *L'Express*, à propos of the recent election. On the other hand, the French Walloons, while Catholic through baptism, are that only; for they are imbued with the rabidly anti-clerical spirit of France which has taught them to regard the church as typifying the re-actionary spirit, organized; and they make war upon it unceasingly as the enemy of the ideals of modern society. The language question is another bone of contention between these two races. Officially there are two languages, French and Flemish. In the lower schools, both are taught, but in the higher institutions of learning, only French is recognized. A very strong demand is constantly being made that a Flemish university be established in Ghent, in order to give recognition to the Flemish language. The divisions between the Flemings and Walloons are so deep that, had Europe permitted, they would have split apart long ago, the Walloons going to France and the Flemings to Holland or perhaps to Germany.

The most significant fact about Belgium today is its extraordinary economic development. This little place, about one-tenth the size of England, is after Germany, England, and France, the most industrialized nation of Europe, and is far ahead of either Russia or Italy in this respect. Splendid coal mines and oil fields have given such a tremendous impulsion to manufacturing that Belgium may be described as the Pennsylvania of Europe. Southern Belgium is really one gigantic factory and presents a picture of the modern world in small compass; the very sky is made lurid by the thousands of fires that turn the wheels of industry. Along with this economic development, there came, naturally enough, great changes in the political system, so that the former battlefield has become the present social laboratory of Europe. An advanced system of social legislation, has been put into operation with many beneficent results. The idea of production and distribution in common, known as

the coöperative movement, has had its greatest success in Belgium. One of the great problems in modern politics is how to make audible the minority of voters in any election, and Belgium has solved the problem of minority representation by introducing an excellent system of proportional representation.

During the greater part of the nineteenth century, the Liberal party, representing the middle classes, governed the country under the leadership of the celebrated statesman Frère-Orban. The high tide of Liberalism then began to ebb in Belgium as everywhere else, but unlike everywhere else, it began to flow in the direction of the conservative party which, in Belgium, is clothed in the religious garb of Catholicism. For thirty years, the Catholic party has now been in full control of the government; and it is a curious contradiction that a country which is the epitome of modern middle class civilization, the "paradise of capitalism," as Karl Marx called her, should be governed by a party representing the agrarian interests of the Flemish peasants and organized by the very soul of the Middle Ages, the Catholic church. In part this is explained by the fact that the Belgium Catholic party, unlike the Centre in Germany, is a Catholic not a distinctly clerical organization. It will do anything to advance the interests of the Catholic faith not at the expense of national well-being, and it is not ultra-montane. A former prime minister, M. Smedt de Naeyer, openly declared that his party was not a confessional one and had not pushed the interests of the church too far. The Catholic church is now awakening to the fact that history is no longer determined by lords and peasants but by capitalists and working-men, and that its attitude must change accordingly. Being conservative by instinct, it generally favors the capitalist, but being also Christian, it advocates measures for the well-being of the working classes; it has safeguarded the interests of capital by farsighted legislation in favor of industry and commerce and has protected the interests of labor by inaugurating the splendid system of social legislation now in force. The members of the left wing of the Catholic party, known as the Catholic Democrats, are continually agitating for more advanced laws in favor of the lower classes. The church has built up a remarkable network of organizations which bind its adherents from the cradle to the grave. There are Catholic political clubs, social, literary and patriotic societies; schools, coöperative societies and labor unions. All these activities have one aim: to capture the workingman, and so divert him from Socialism.

The rapid disintegration that has overtaken continental Liberalism is

one of the most significant signs of present European politics. Crushed between the upper millstone of Conservatism and the nether millstone of Socialism, the Liberal parties have been steadily losing ground in every country. They have been saved from utter annihilation only by championing the cause of anti-clericalism. On this issue, there is a sort of *entente cordiale* between the middle class parties and the Socialists, known as the "Grossblok" in Germany, the radical "bloc" in France and the "cartel" in Belgium. In England, Liberalism has held its own through becoming radicalism. Having played their part in history by introducing constitutional government, the Liberals are now about to pass from the political scene, for the principles of 1789 and of 1848 are now triumphant everywhere, except in Russia, but then Russia is still in the eighteenth century. In the opinion of many, the future political battles in continental Europe will be fought between Socialism representing the laboring classes, and the allied conservative interests cemented by the Catholic church. In Belgium, particularly, has Liberalism been a vanishing cause which is, to some extent due to internal dissensions. In the first place, they are divided as to whether to stick to their "moderate" ideas or become radical; secondly, the racial question of Walloons versus Flemings has distracted the party; finally, they are always in doubt whether to throw in their lot with the Catholics or with the Socialists. Urged on by the Liberal Association, a radical organization, the Liberals in the last election formed a compact with the Socialists known as the "cartel," the aim of which was to fight the Catholics on the school issue. The "cartel" demanded compulsory secular education, the abolition of plural voting, and the "declericalization of the state."

In no land is Socialism less revolutionary, less romantic or so well harnessed to the ideal of peaceful slow change along coöperative lines as in Belgium. It is even afraid of labelling itself Socialist, and deliberately chooses to be known as the Labor party. It was born in the year 1885 and immediately began an agitation for universal suffrage. In 1894, after a tremendous demonstration, the Catholic government was forced to accede to their demand; in the election that followed, the Socialists won twenty-five out of one hundred sixty-six seats in the chamber of deputies. It is interesting to notice, how in spite of the dogma of internationalism which Socialists everywhere so loudly proclaim, the character of the Socialist movement in every country follows strictly along the line of national temperament. German socialists are as well organized and as well drilled as the German army; moreover,

they are as full of abstract philosophy as any pedantic German professor. In France, Socialism smacks of the barricade, has the *élan* bequeathed by the French Revolution, is distracted by factionalism, and as meager of actual results as any bourgeois government that ever proclaimed a new republic in the name of "Liberty, Fraternity and Equality." In England, Socialism muddles along like the best of Tories and Liberals, it snatches a bit for itself here and there, is very careful not to have any principles and, of course, stands ready at all times to compromise. Now in Belgium, too, Socialism falls in harmony with the national temperament, which is communal. Belgium is alive with coöperative societies, some of the most important of which, are under Socialist auspices. One of the most remarkable places in Europe is "La Maison du Peuple" of Brussels. It would be hard to describe what it is not. In the first place, it is a great coöperative store supplying 20,000 families with every conceivable need: food, fuel, drink, furniture, drugs, etc. This vast department store does over 6,500,000 francs worth of business yearly. Besides, it is a great social center, wherein all sorts of clubs and classes hold meetings and give entertainments; medical attention is also furnished to members who form a sort of mutual benefit society. It is the nerve center of the Labor party and is known as the Socialist Vatican; there, strikes are called, policies determined upon and demonstrations organized. "La Maison du Peuple" publishes a daily paper, *Le Peuple*, which is the official organ of the party. At Ghent, there is a similar organization, known as the "Vooruit" which started as a small coöperative bakery and now does 3,000,000 francs worth of business annually. Along with groceries, bread and meat, the Socialist often retails ideas for these places are excellent means of propaganda and very often, a Belgian becomes a Socialist through nutrition. The coöperative societies are a new phase of the war waged against Capitalism by the laboring classes, who use these organizations to fight not only as producers but as consumers, by refusing to buy their things at stores run by private capital. This idea is spreading rapidly in Germany at the present time. Yet in spite of the distinctly national character of Belgian Socialism, it would be wrong to say that it has not been profoundly influenced by its neighbors. As the famous Socialist writer, Emile Vandeveldel well says:

Belgian Socialism, at the conflux of three great European civilizations, partakes of the character of each of them. From the English, it adopted self-help and free association, principally under the coöperative form, from the Germans, political tactics and fundamental doctrines

. from the French, it took its idealist tendencies, its integral conceptions of Socialism, considered as a continuation of the revolutionary philosophy.

The main issue of the exciting election that was decided on June 2 last was the schools. As the educational question has become an issue between Catholics and free-thinkers the world over, it may be of some interest to examine the situation in Belgium. In 1879, when the Liberals were in power, the government passed a stringent education law establishing a system of public schools on a free secular basis; later optional religious instruction was included. These were called the "neutral" schools because they were neutral in religion. The church bitterly denounced the "neutral" schools as Godless and anarchistic, and established a rival system, known as the "free" schools because they were free from government control. According to the law, the communes were compelled to maintain the "neutral" schools, though subsidies were granted by the central government. The tax was heavy and the Catholic father supported the "free" school besides. This was too much for the frugal Belgian. Moreover, the Catholics denounced the law as an interference on the part of the government with the rights of the communes, and so appealed to the historic communal spirit of the Belgians. In 1884, the Catholic party gained control of the government and immediately passed a new education act, which is still in force. This law declares that every commune shall have the right to establish its own schools, and it may choose either the "neutral" or the "free." In case it chooses one or the other, the defeated party can then appeal to the central government. If a petition be signed by twenty heads of families, the school established by the minority in that district receives a small subsidy, provided it submits to government inspection. This law placed both school systems on a basis of equality for both, now had the right of public support. The Catholic government however studiously disregarded the interests of the public school and did all in its power to promote the welfare of its rival and enemy. As a result, secular education in Belgium during the thirty years that the law has been in existence, has suffered severely. Slowly but surely the public schools were being supplanted by those of the church. According to the latest statistics, 877 primary. 1079 adult and 228 orphan schools of the "neutral" system have been suppressed—likewise 14 state normal institutions. It is reckoned that 3316 public school teachers have had their salaries reduced and 1047 have been discharged, their places being taken by monks and nuns, who now constitute about one-third of all

the teachers. Secular education was being slowly starved out of existence. In many places there are not enough "free" schools to take the place of those suppressed, and the rate of illiteracy is very high, about 18.6 per cent. Last year the Catholic party determined to make another attack on the "neutral" schools. The premier M. Schollaert, introduced a bill, the aim of which was to strengthen the "free" schools, and so give the church still greater control over Belgian education. Some of the features of this bill were very good: education was made compulsory, teachers were to get higher salaries and the elementary course was made two years longer. However, the main provision of the proposed law was the establishment of the *bon scolaire*, by which was meant that each year the communal authorities were to give every father in the district a certificate, known as the *bon scolaire*, for every one of his children of school age. The father was to have the right to send the child either to the "neutral" or to the "free" school. These certificates were to be collected by the head of the school to which the child went, and then turned over to the central government, which was to grant this school from 30 to 36 francs for each certificate. This meant, that not only had the Catholic schools the right to be supported by the local authorities, but, in addition they were to be given a large bonus from the central government. The Schollaert bill aroused a storm of indignation among Liberals and Socialists and as the Catholic majority in the last chamber was only six, the ministry resigned and the bill was withdrawn. M. de Brockville succeeded as prime minister, and it was understood that the bill would be re-introduced by him in case the Catholic party won in the following election. During the campaign, the Liberals and Socialists demanded compulsory education and a complete system of secular public schools under the control of the central government. The battle for the control of the child raged furiously; the issue was plain which side was to give the future citizen of Belgium, his lasting impressions.

Belgium has the peculiar distinction of having an electoral system which is at the same time the most and the least democratic in the world. Proportional representation, that democratic idea which is beginning to make progress everywhere, was first adopted in Belgium, where it is known as the "system of the common divisor" or the "d'Hondt method" from its inventor. The method provides for the division of the country into nine electoral units, corresponding to the nine provinces, and to each is assigned a number of deputies, according to population. These deputies are elected on a general ticket in the following manner. The ballot, as a rule, contains only three party columns, Catholic, Liberal,

and Socialist, numbered 1, 2, and 3. In these columns are the lists of the candidates for the chamber of deputies, arranged in the order of choice by the party organizations. Every citizen is entitled to only one vote which he casts for the entire list by blackening the white spot at the top of the column; votes a straight ticket, as we say. He is not permitted to vote for more than one list on the ballot, and if he does so, the ballot is void; but if the order of the candidates, as arranged by his party, does not meet with his approval, he may show his disapproval by blackening the white spot in front of the name of the candidate he prefers. This means that he votes a straight ticket, but also gives a "preferential vote" for that particular man. It will be much easier to explain the operation of a Belgian election by giving an example. Let us say that in a certain province which is entitled to five representatives, 48,500 votes have been cast. Of this number, the Catholics have received 24,000; the Liberals, 15,000; the Socialists, 9000; the "electoral quotient" is obtained by successively dividing the vote of each party by 1, 2, 3, etc., thus:

	<i>Catholic</i>	<i>Liberal</i>	<i>Socialist</i>
Divide by 1.....	24,000	15,500	9,000
Divide by 2.....	12,000	7,750	4,500
Divide by 3.....	8,000	5,167	3,000

The five highest figures are then arranged in the order of size thus:

24,000
15,500
12,000
9,000
8,000

The figure 8000, being the highest for the fifth seat is declared the "electoral quotient." Dividing the Catholic vote 24,000 by the "electoral quotient" 8000, we get 3 and no remainder votes; the Liberal 15,000 by 8000, we get 1 and 7500 remainder votes; the Socialist 9000 by 8000 and we get 1 and 1000 remainder votes. Disregarding the remainder votes, the first three candidates on the Catholic list, the first one on the Liberal and the first one on the Socialist are declared elected. The problem of the "preferential votes" is solved in rather a complicated manner. Let us say that of the five names on the Catholic list, A, B, C, D, and E, candidate D got 4000 "preferential votes," the assignment will then be made viz: if D got 4000 "preferential votes," then 20,000 (24,000—4000) Catholic voters were satisfied with their party's arrange-

ment of candidates on the list. This 20,000 forms a sort of pool, from which A and B each take out 8000, the amount of the "electoral quotient." This leaves 4000 for C which is not sufficient as the number is not equal to the "electoral quotient," but D has 4000 "preferential votes;" this with the remainder 4000 gives him 8000, equal to the "electoral quotient." Hence, A, B and D will be declared the winning candidates on the Catholic ticket. Proportional representation in Belgium has had the good effect of clarifying the political situation by forcing the adoption of a three-party system to correspond to the three classes of society. The leading men of each party are always certain of being elected to the chamber, for their names are generally put at the head of the list and this is tantamount to an election. In spite of the fact that the d'Hondt system was purposely designed to favor the largest party, representation in Belgium is fairly proportionate to the votes cast. Very rarely will the Catholic party have more than two or three deputies in excess of its rightful representation, according to the popular vote. Compare this with the frightful system of misrepresentation, fostered by the majority or plurality system, whereby huge minorities are practically disfranchised.

To counterbalance this democratic feature of the Belgium constitution, there was inaugurated a system of plural voting, based on property and education which strongly favors the conservative and aristocratic elements. According to the law, every Belgian citizen twenty-five years old, is entitled to one vote. He may get an additional vote if, at the age of thirty-five, he is a married man with children and pays at least five francs taxes on his dwelling; if in addition he owns real estate which nets him an income of at least forty-eight francs a year or has money invested which yields him an income of 100 francs annually he is entitled to another additional vote; two additional votes are granted to citizens who possess a diploma from a higher institution of learning or from a professional school. No citizen is allowed more than three votes. In the election of 1908, the number of electors was 1,697,619 of which 993,070 cast 1 vote, 395,886 cast 2 votes, 308,683 cast 3 votes. In other words, the last group, a small minority, had actually enough votes to nullify the will of the nation. A large number of the plural voters are the peasants, who generally own their farms, priests, officials and capitalists; the mass of workingmen, of course, have only one vote. On August 15, 1911, there took place a great demonstration in the streets of Brussels against the "*vote plural, vote rural, vote clérical*" which has become the campaign cry of the Socialists. After

the bitterest campaign in the history of Belgium, the Catholics emerged unexpectedly triumphant. Of the 186 seats in the Chamber of Deputies they carried 101, a gain of 15; the Liberals, 45, which was the same as they had before; and the Socialists, 38, a gain of 4. The Christian Democrats, a progressive Catholic faction, elected two members. Of the popular vote, the Catholics received 1,344,449, and the "cartel," 1,246,425, a Catholic majority of 103,024; the government majority over its allied opponents is now 18, whereas, in the last Chamber, it was only 6. Most significant is the fact that the Catholics made large gains in industrial centers like Brussels and Liège. The Socialists, too, increased their vote, though not as much as was expected; but the Liberals barely managed to hold their own.

This result was entirely unexpected, even in Belgium, and it calls for some explanation. In the first place, Belgium is prosperous and contented, and the electors are loath to oust from power the Catholic party that has governed so moderately, and on the whole, so successfully for thirty years. This feeling was naturally strongest among the property-owning classes, i. e., the plural voters, who really determine the electoral contests. Voting is compulsory in Belgium and this helps the conservative party. The well-to-do classes of continental Europe are notoriously lax in their civic duties, but the rapid growth of Socialism has aroused them to the danger that threatens them from below, with the result that, in some countries, laws have been passed making voting compulsory. This is intended as a prod to the conservative elements to be on guard. The Belgian law exacts a fine from those who fail to vote, greatly to the disgust of the Socialists, who, having a cause to fight for, seldom fail to make use of their franchises. The alliance of Liberals with the Socialists helped their opponents. Had the "cartel" won, there surely would have been several Socialists in the Liberal cabinet; it was well-known that the famous Socialist leader, Emile Vandervelde, was promised a portfolio. As in France, the entrance of Socialists in the cabinet meant the stiffening of the Liberal backbone to wage war on the church; in all probability there would have taken place the separation of church and state, the secularization of education and perhaps the confiscation of church property. The Belgian people are not ready for an anti-clerical crusade, for among them, the Catholic tradition is the strongest in Europe. Then again, the "petit bourgeois" became badly frightened at the thought of the government being at the mercy of the Socialists. As in England and France, this would surely lead to a policy of still more radical social legislation which would mean increased taxes for him and he

didn't at all relish the idea of being heavily taxed for the benefit of the workingman. Never very radical and exceedingly frugal, the Belgian middle classes, for this reason, deserted the Liberals in overwhelming numbers in favor of the Catholic party. This explains the large vote of the latter in the industrial centers; for it was the "independent" vote that made possible an overwhelming Catholic victory.

The most significant result of the Belgian election is undoubtedly the blow that has been dealt to secular education. During the campaign, the Catholics continually denounced the "neutral" schools as nurseries of crime and anarchy. Bonnot, the automobile bandit of Paris, whose desperate exploits had filled the columns of the sensational press, was held up as an example of the influence of the public schools on the rising generation. He was almost dignified into an issue. It must be remembered that the idea of public secular education is a new one in Europe, where primary schools have always been under ecclesiastical influence. At bottom, the middle classes in the old world are not very enthusiastic about popular education. They fear that an all-too-clever proletariat would make things uncomfortable for them, and the growth of Socialism has increased this fear. Religious, or at least, "moral" instruction, it is hoped, would modify those ideas and energies that make for revolution. Europe is as yet a little unwilling to follow the American example of allowing the common man to run the whole gamut of education, from the kindergarten through the university. The great ideal of America, its only original contribution to modern civilization, is not democratic government as is commonly supposed, but the public schools. Our people have a profound faith that only education, pure and simple, has the power to steady the workingman in his battle for a better existence in this world.